

God is Waiting

Last Christmas I received a card from my nephew that said “Merry Christmas from Jamie and Dan, (that’s my nephew and his wife) and Julianna, Bella, and Gab (their children).” I turned it over and it said on the back: “Coming this winter” and it showed a sonogram. What a creative way to announce a new baby! Eva will celebrate her first Christmas this year.

John the Baptizer was God’s creative way to announce the good news that someone is coming, someone who is powerful, someone who, John says, is so great he is not worthy to untie his sandal strap.

John went into the desert, which is a holy place, a quiet place, where discernment happens. There he hears the Word of God. We are called to go to a quiet place, too, where we can hear the word of God. It’s God’s Word, God’s presence that makes our quiet space holy.

The writer of Matthew’s Gospel is careful to tell us that John wears a camel skin and leather belt. Why? Because that is what Elijah, the great prophet of the Old Testament, wore. In other words, “Here is another great prophet; so you had better listen up!” He eats locusts and wild honey. Yum!! Why? Locusts are reminiscent of God’s judgment on those who don’t listen, like the Egyptians; and wild honey is reminiscent of what God promises: a land of milk and honey, telling us to have hope in what is to come.

All kinds of people come out to hear John. Again, why? To get a second chance, to turn their lives around and recommit to God. Perhaps it was to hear the Good News that the One who they have been waiting for is here!

John is taking us on a pilgrimage. I lead people, Franciscan leaders, to Rome and Assisi each year. We go to a sacred place, we hear the stories of what happened there, and change happens to the listeners. John takes us to the edge of the Jordan, to the edge of our hearts. He tells us, “Reform! Take this moment to recommit your hearts to God. When you make up your mind to turn from your sins, your bad ways of acting, your attitudes of complacency, then I’ll pour water over you, showing you are washed new.”

“Make crooked paths straight,” says John. The people would understand this because this is what is done for a king, roads are fixed, pathways are smoothed and straightened for the king’s chariot. Or, in contemporary vocabulary: “Hit the refresh button”! If your heart is bent over by the weight of sin, stand up and let God come in.

We are called during these weeks, to examine our heart space into which God comes. We need to look at those places that need God's light, where we neglect loved one, are impatient, selfish, any number of "crooked" behaviors that have become a part of our way of relating. We are called to allow God's grace to free up those places in our hearts that are bound by fear, regrets, anger and resentment. We are being invited to stretch our hearts.

Reform is not about guilt over past sins, it's about showing that we desire to change and actually doing works, "fruits" John calls them, that prove our desire to change.

John called the Sadducees and Pharisees, whose hearts were hardened, a "Brood of Vipers!" He could have said: "You Scrooges!" Or: "You Grinches!"

We can thank Dr. Seuss, in his children's story: The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, for a rendering of these hardened, jealous hearts:

*"The Grinch hated Christmas, the whole Christmas season!
Now please don't ask why, no one quite knows the reason.
It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right, it could be
perhaps that his shoes were too tight.*

*But I think that the most likely reason of all, may have been
that his heart was two sizes too small."*

So the story goes on: the Grinch wants everyone in Whoville to be as miserable as he is, so he steals all the Christmas trees, the toys and other presents, and all the food for Christmas. Then he takes it all back to his mountain – waiting to hear the sounds of crying from Whoville. But..

*"Everyone in Whoville the tall and the small, was singing without
any presents at all.
He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming, it came! Somehow or other
it came just the same.
And the Grinch, with his Grinch feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling:
how could it be so?!
It came without ribbons. It came without tags.
It came without packages, boxes or bags.
And he puzzled for hours – 'til his puzzler was sore...
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before.*

*Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store...
Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."*

And what happened then?

Well: in Whoville they say, that the Grinch's heart grew three sizes that day."

In the Sanctuary today, we have a photo of a man, Nelson Mandela, whose heart did not get embittered during his 27 years in prison, for 18 of them, doing hard labor and being tortured on Robben Island. In fact, his heart grew to the point where he envisioned what Isaiah was envisioning: where the lion lies down with the lamb, the bear with the kid, and a child can play over an adder's den... The Peaceable Kingdom! He envisioned a world where enemy sits down with perpetrator to make peace; he worked for a world where justice was given to the oppressed. After being released from prison, Mandela started the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' which went around the country of South Africa having oppressor sit down with the oppressed, where killers would sit with those who lost loved ones, and together, they developed arrangements for compensation, justice and mutual collaboration.

It is often said that Advent is a time of waiting for God, but I think it's a time to recall that God is waiting for us! God is waiting for us to allow God's grace to stretch our hearts. God is waiting for us to bring love and peace to our families, our neighbors, our parish, our city. God is waiting for us to care for our sisters and brothers in poor countries. God is waiting for us to help bring in the Kingdom. God is waiting for... us!

Amen.